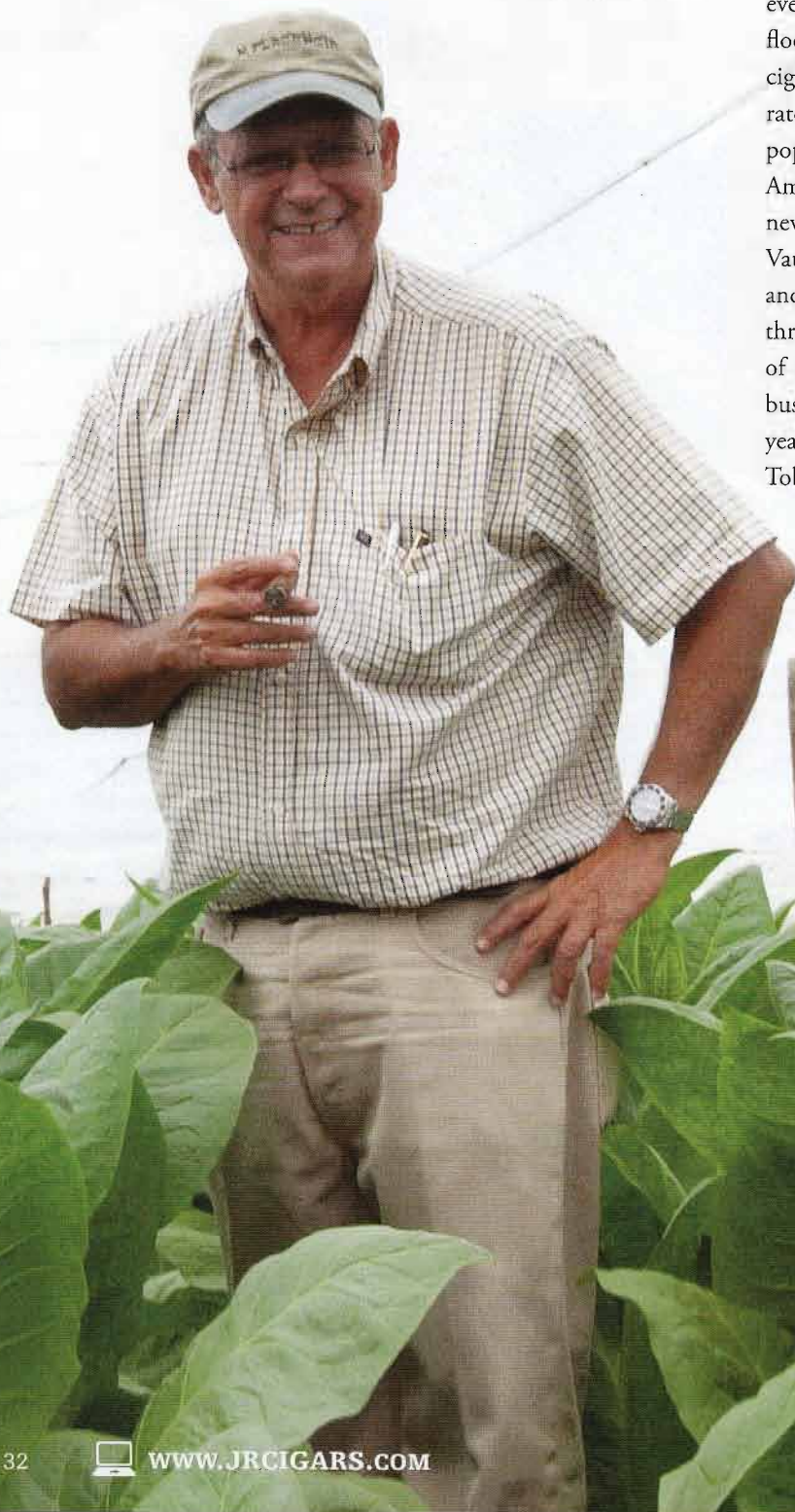


# Nestor Plasencia Cigarmaker *to the Stars*

*by Frank Seltzer*



When cigar smokers get together to talk about the latest and most highly rated cigars, one family's work is often mentioned... but the family itself is not. The Plasencias—Nestor and his son Nestor Andres—generally prefer to be behind the scenes as opposed to center stage. In fact, at this year's International Premium Cigar & Pipe Retailers Association (IPCPR) convention, they did not even have a display. Instead, they walked the show floor visiting their customers, truly a who's who of cigar companies. The Plasencias make the highly rated Casa Magna for the Quesadas, the extremely popular Edge for Rocky Patel, Alec Bradley's new American Classic and Black Market, Jesus Fuego's new Sangre de Toro, and even the new Toraño Vault, plus classics like Maria Mancini, Bering, and La Primadora. They operate five factories—three in Honduras and two in Nicaragua. The bulk of the cigars they make are for their private-label business, much like the Toraño family did for many years until selling their factories to Scandinavian Tobacco in 2008.

The Plasencias also are one of the largest tobacco growers in Honduras, Nicaragua, and even Costa Rica, with about 2,000 acres directly farmed by the family, and another 22,000 farmed under contract to them. In all, the Plasencias employ more than 6,000 people. But their beginnings, like many of the cigar families today, were modest in Cuba.





Nestor Plasencia's great-grandfather Santiago moved from Spain's Canary Islands to Cuba in 1850. Like many Spaniards at the time and later, he was looking for a new life and rewarding opportunities. He came with two of his brothers, who left their families behind with yet another brother to look after them, and settled in the Vuelta Abajo region, a rich area they had heard much about. A few years later, they rented a farm named El Corojo from the Cifuentes family, the makers of Partagas. The Plasencias began growing and sorting wrapper leaf, and it was to this farm that Nestor's grandfather Sixto came in 1890, after making the trip from Spain by himself at the age of 14.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, more Spaniards came to the Vuelta Abajo region in Pinar del Río including Santiago Toraño, who arrived in 1916 and began buying and selling tobacco. In 1920, Nestor Plasencia's father, Sixto Jr., was born and, the same year, Diego Rodriguez rented a small farm bordering the Plasencias' El Corojo. The renting of that farm might not seem important, but the results are. Rodriguez spent about 10 years working hard to select and care for the absolute best tobacco in each year's crop. He carefully crossbred the plants and, by 1930, he had developed a new varietal named for his El Corojo farm. That tobacco would become world-famous as Corojo-seed wrappers. The Toraños soon moved into farming themselves with a nearby farm called La Esperanza. Just down the road was La Victoria, the farm of the Eiroa family. Bordering La Victoria was Macio, a joint venture between the Cura and Oliva families. All of these families began their successes in Cuba before scattering to other parts of Latin America after Castro's takeover.

## Honduran Factory COROJOS

*All of these smokes were destined to be premium-branded, handmade cigars packed in boxes but, instead, they were packed up in kraft-paper-wrapped bundles of 50. Now it's your turn to get in on one of our very best deals ever!*



### HONDURAN FACTORY COROJOS

Handmade in Honduras • Medium Bodied

Code	Frontmark	Color • Size	Qty	MSRP	JR Price	Sale Price
HOCBE	Belicoso Torpedo	E • 6.00 x 54	50	\$175.00	\$69.95	<b>\$59.95</b>
HOCEM	Emperor	E, M • 8.50 x 50	50	\$187.50	\$77.95	<b>\$67.95</b>
HOCGC	Gran Corona	E • 6.00 x 46	50	\$137.50	\$59.95	<b>\$49.95</b>
HOCL	Lonsdale	E • 6.62 x 44	50	\$137.50	\$59.95	<b>\$49.95</b>
HOCPR	Presidente	E • 7.50 x 52	50	\$175.00	\$69.95	<b>\$59.95</b>
HOCRO	Robusto	E • 4.75 x 52	50	\$137.50	\$59.95	<b>\$49.95</b>
HOCT	Toro	E • 6.00 x 50	50	\$150.00	\$64.95	<b>\$54.95</b>

Prices subject to change without notice. Not responsible for typographical errors. All offers good while supplies last.

Single cigars available for sale

800-JR-CIGAR



As they grew older, Sixto Jr. and his nine brothers and sisters started their own company, Hijos de Sixto Plasencia. The family continued to grow and sort wrapper for all the major cigar manufacturers in both Cuba and the United States. A new generation was born, with the arrival of Nestor in 1949. Things were going extremely well until the revolution in 1959, when life began to change. In 1960, Carlos Toraño and Julio Eiroa both fled the country. Factories and land were seized but the government left the smaller Plasencia farm alone; Sixto Jr. believed that this situation wouldn't last. On October 3, 1963, he was proven wrong. Troops arrived and took all the Plasencia land at gunpoint (though not their house), along with any assets the family had made. The Plasencias knew then that they too had to leave their homeland.

Leaving Cuba was not an easy matter; it took another couple of years for the family to make its exit. Initially, they planned to move to Jamaica to help run a tobacco farm but, just before they left, they discovered the operation had gone bankrupt. In May of 1965, the Plasencias went to Mexico, arriving with only \$100. Sixto Jr., looking for work, made a call to his old friend Julio Eiroa. It took Eiroa about 20 days to obtain family travel visas for Honduras while the Plasencias subsisted on money sent by relatives in the United States.

Once the visas arrived, Sixto Jr. sent a telegram to Eiroa to let him know they were on the way. That telegram never made it; the family arrived in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, only to be virtually stranded. Sixto went to a local hotel where he was recognized by an old friend from Cuba and, within a couple of hours, he had a job. A few minutes after accepting it, Angel Oliva showed up and offered him a better job, but Sixto honored his original agreement and took his family from Tegucigalpa to Danlí.

In the 1960s, Danlí was not much; Nestor remembers there were no phones, little electricity, few roads, and lots of rain. He hated it at the time. But the Plasencias' stay there was brief, as the family moved to Estelí, Nicaragua, to begin work at Caribbean Tobacco. Many Cubans were drawn to Honduras and Nicaragua in the '60s as the tobacco industry began to flourish. With Cuban tobacco now off limits to American cigar factories, Central American tobacco began to take its place. Nestor continued to help his father in the fields while finishing high school in Estelí, and then headed off to the Escuela Internacional de Agricultura to study agronomy.

By 1967, with his obligation to his old friend complete, Sixto Jr. moved from Estelí to Jalapa to help the Oliva family run a sorting operation at their La Limonera farm, so named

because of the lemon trees on the property. The farm grew and Sixto Jr. processed fire-cured candela wrappers, which were in heavy demand. Nestor helped his father at the farm, and the Olivas sold their tobacco to Tampa's top factories.

By 1972, Nestor and his father were partnered in a new farm. Nestor grew candela wrapper and sun-grown Cuban-seed filler for Nicaraguan Cigar, at the time owned by Daniel Rodriguez (the son of Diego, former owner of El Corajo farm), and Juan Bermejo and Simon Camacho, Cuban friends of his father. Nestor also began working for Caribbean Tobacco, where he learned more curing methods, and even visited Florida to further his knowledge of curing candela from John Oliva and Pepe Cura, former neighbors in Cuba.

Caribbean Tobacco was in the business of buying or renting plantations from farmers, which gave those farmers guaranteed income for their crops by taking out the possibility of losing money due to drought, disease, or other causes. Nestor made good money from the operation until 1978, when tensions between the left-wing rebel Sandinistas and the government of Anastasio Somoza reached a boiling point. Nestor found a farm in neighboring Jamastran, Honduras, and moved with his wife, father, and three-year-old son, Nestor Andres. The first crop he grew was beautiful but Caribbean would not buy it, as Nicaragua's President Somoza had taken an interest in Caribbean's Nicaraguan growing operations and did not want Honduran tobacco. Nestor was stuck until the Olivas came through and bought the crop.

In Nicaragua, the situation deteriorated rapidly. By July of 1979, the Sandinistas took control of the country and ousted Somoza. Within a few months, Estelí—the cigarmaking capital of Nicaragua—was decimated. Factories were burned, including those of Padrón, Nicaragua Cigar, and Fuente, and farms were confiscated. Honduras became the major source of tobacco for American factories. In 1979, Nestor expanded with a 140-acre farm and by building curing barns and putting up posts for Connecticut shade wrapper. The work was backbreaking but the crop was beautiful. Plasencia's candela leaf was lucrative; unlike traditional wrappers that took months to cure, candela was fire-cured in a day or so, and immediately ready for sale, which meant fast cash. Things were looking great... until February 26, 1980, when a worker awakened Nestor with a report that something was terribly wrong with the crop.

Nestor rushed to the field and picked a few leaves. He could see something was amiss but he didn't know what. He showed the leaves to Sixto Jr., who gave him the bad news—*blue mold*; there would be nothing left in the fields by the next





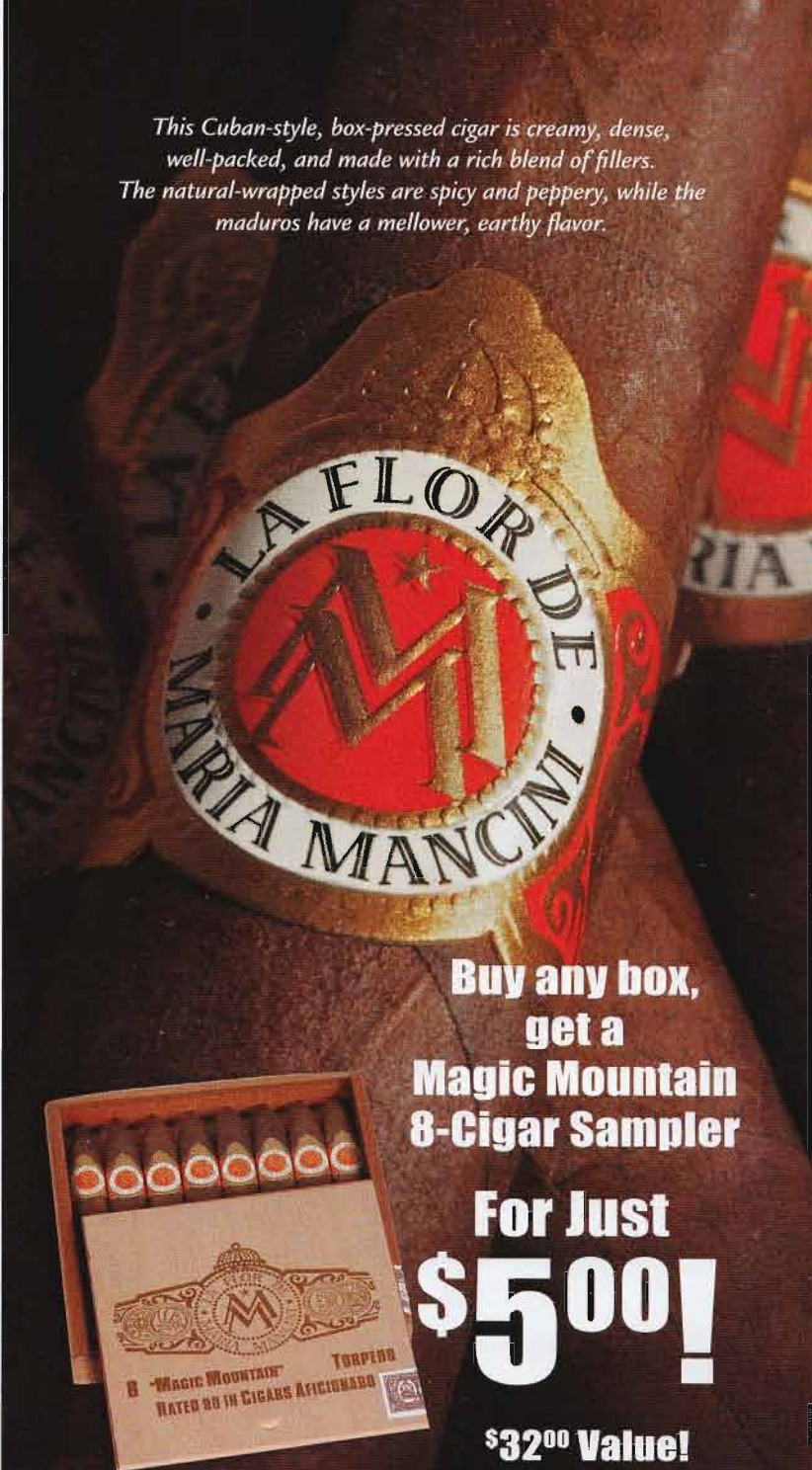
day. The elder Plasencia was right; 24 hours later, the entire field was ruined.

The only thing that saved Nestor was that some of the crop had already been picked and was in the barn. Still, he was wary about planting as much the following year. He bought a fungicide recommended by the Olivas and cut down to only 80 acres. The results were terrific—no blue mold. The next season, he upped his planting to 300 acres, again with great success. In 1983, as demand for Honduran tobacco continued to rise, he increased to 500 acres. However, blue mold adapts; it rendered the previously successful fungicide powerless, and 90 percent of Nestor's wrapper crop was gone. He picked and bailed the rest for filler and binder because, of course, no one wanted wrapper leaf with holes caused by the fungus. Unfortunately, no one wanted his filler and binder either.

He was able to use the stored tobacco as collateral for a loan to plant his 1984 crop, but again the mold struck in 1985. Nestor was able to salvage only 10 percent of those crops, which he sold for wrapper. The rest was put away for filler and binder and, while it gave him a tremendous store of tobacco (over one million pounds), it also left him with an enormous debt. He knew he had to start using or selling it, so, in June of '85, he opened a small factory in Honduras. The next year was a turning point for the Plasencias. The tobacco crop was again attacked in 1986, but Nestor realized that, if he moved up the planting by two months, he would avoid the cooler, wetter weather that caused the blue mold to thrive. In the meantime, his creditors worked out a deal with Santa Clara to take 500,000 cigars a month as a way of paying down the debt. A creditor also arranged with Swisher for Nestor to manufacture 60 percent of that company's Bering brand, doubling the size of the factory and helping him to make a dent in 40 years' worth of stockpiled tobacco. Things were looking up; his small factory was not so small anymore.

The new planting schedule helped Nestor get rid of the mold problems and begin to reap real rewards and better crops. By 1990, Nestor was able

*This Cuban-style, box-pressed cigar is creamy, dense, well-packed, and made with a rich blend of fillers. The natural-wrapped styles are spicy and peppery, while the maduros have a mellow, earthy flavor.*



**Buy any box,  
get a  
Magic Mountain  
8-Cigar Sampler**

**For Just  
\$5<sup>00</sup>!**

**\$32<sup>00</sup> Value!**

#### MARIA MANCINI

Handmade in Honduras • Medium-Full Bodied

Code	Frontmark	Color • Size	Qty	MSRP	JR Price
MMCL	Clemenceau ✓	E, M • 7.50 x 50	20	\$80.00	\$54.95
MMCC	Corona Classico	E • 5.50 x 44	20	\$70.00	\$46.95
MMDG	DeGaulle ✓	E, M • 4.75 x 52	20	\$70.00	\$46.95
MMEX	Excellence	E • 6.00 x 52	20	\$75.00	\$50.95
MMMM	Magic Mountain ✓	E, M • 6.00 x 54	20	\$80.00	\$54.95
MMRL	Robusto Larga	E, M • 6.00 x 50	20	\$75.00	\$50.95



to pay off his debts and, the next year, he opened a second factory in Ocotál, Nicaragua. The country had stabilized and, by the time the Cigar Boom hit in 1993, Plasencia was in the catbird seat. While others were scrambling for tobacco, the Plasencias had plenty. They even added a third factory, making production soar to over 250 thousand cigars a day!

Output continued to climb during the Boom as new entrants to the business offered to pay any amount for cigars. In 1994, Nestor returned to Estelí, rented a building, and established yet another factory as he and Nestor Andres developed plans to build a new Estelí operation from the ground up in partnership with Swiss cigarmaker Dannemann. Opened for business in 1996, the Plasencias' Segovia Cigars in Estelí was an exact copy of the Danneman factory in São Félix, Brazil, complete with a courtyard. During the last year of the Cigar Boom, the Plasencias sold their Danlí, Honduras, factory for over \$20 million—and all the buyer got was a production facility with no proprietary brands. The Plasencias, on the other hand, had millions in the bank, five factories, their farms, and, *still*, lots of tobacco. At the end of the Boom, Nestor Andres began working with his father in the fields after earning his agriculture engineering degree at the Escuela Agrícola Panamericana Zamorano.

While his father was developing a disease-resistant Habana 2000 wrapper for Nicaragua and Honduras, Nestor Andres was fascinated with the prospect of organic tobacco farming. He had studied organic farming and knew it worked with some

crops, though it had never been tried with tobacco. "I came out of the agricultural university with a crazy idea in my mind. The idea was that cigar smokers don't care much about organic stuff but they *do* care about new concepts, new ideas, and new stories. The story behind the organic tobacco is the taste of discovery," Nestor Andres says. "When the Europeans came to America, they fell in love with tobacco, and the taste that they discovered was natural because, at the time, there were no chemical pesticides or fertilizers—it was totally organic. And we wanted people to feel like they were conquistadores, that they conquered this taste and they conquered this world. It is a great history and flavor."

Getting there was neither easy nor cheap but Nestor Andres, with the backing of his father, was on a mission. To keep pests away, garlic sticks were installed around the fields; the bugs come to the fields, smell the garlic, and leave the tobacco alone. For fertilizer, they add earthworms to cow manure to make humus. When not planting tobacco, the Plasencias grow special beans with the capacity to absorb nitrogen from the air and put it into the soil. Peanut flour adds more nutrients, and the sun is the fungicide they depend on. Adds Nestor Andres, "We changed the organic growing season. It is at the end of the normal growing season when the temperatures are higher, the sunlight brighter, and days are longer. We grow sunflowers around the fields so the beneficial insects come and eat the bad insects. We use a lot of biological control." This tobacco is kept separate from the "normal" tobacco in exclusive farms, curing barns, and even storage. The result is a special tobacco that is certified organic.

In 2001, the company came out with the Plasencia Organica but kept its distribution limited, as it is expensive to grow tobacco organically and the yield is not very high. The family is seeing success in Europe and Japan with Organica, and may display it at the IPCPR show in 2012. But they do not want it to detract from their main business—making cigars for other companies. "We want our customers to feel our factory is their factory, so we are not competing against them. We have our Plasencia cigars and our Organica brand. We are not competing with anybody else. Organica is a unique product and we are the only ones in the world to have done it," explains Nestor Andres. "We are very proud of it because we show people that, if we can grow the tobacco in the hardest conditions, totally organically, we can grow any tobacco *anywhere*."

The organic experience is affecting their traditional tobacco fields as well. The Plasencias monitor every field for insects and, if the count is below a certain number, they do not add





pesticides. Nestor says it is helping them become more efficient.

The Plasencias' philosophy is to start with the tobacco, taking great care to ensure that it's the best it can be. They made a change about a decade ago in how they process their tobacco by doing a selection prior to fermentation, with Nestor choosing every leaf right out of the barn for texture. "We don't care if the leaf is first priming, second priming, or third priming—the texture is what is important to us. When we plant in November, the second priming of this leaf usually is 100 percent seco. But, in the same crop, the same farm, planted in February, you can have a second priming that is 60 percent seco but 40 percent viso," he elaborates. "That's why I don't pay much attention to the priming. The first day the tobacco is in the barn, we are checking the texture of the leaf so we ferment all the seco together, all the viso together, and all the ligero together. For example," he continues, "in fermentation, seco needs less temperature and less water than a viso or ligero. If you have seco and viso together, you can over-ferment the seco because you are planning on the viso, and then you have a big mess in the bulk and the consistency is not going to be there. It is more expensive because you have to select all the leaves, but at the end, it is a better result. We are assured consistency and that is what people are looking for. When we sell a bale of seco, it will be 100 percent seco leaves."

With five factories and lots of farms, the labor has now been divided between Nestor and Nestor Andres—the younger running the factories while the elder is having fun in the fields.

Nestor continues to work with new tobaccos. A few years ago, he and General Cigar began growing tobacco on the island of Ometepe. Located in Lake Nicaragua, the largest freshwater lake in Central America (and 19<sup>th</sup> in the world), Ometepe was formed by two volcanoes and is renowned for its soil. "Ometepe has a very special characteristic. The soil is volcanic and extremely rich in nutrients. It is a very small island and it has fresh, sweet water surrounding it, and special weather because of that. The tobacco is great with intense flavors," expands Nestor.



*Named for master cigarmaker Nestor Plasencia and crafted in his Nicaraguan factory, this is one of his original blends. Expertly rolled with a Connecticut seed wrapper grown in Ecuador and filler tobaccos from Honduras and Nicaragua, it is medium in strength and loaded with complex, rich flavors. With its extremely moderate price, you'd be doing yourself a favor by giving this often overlooked cigar a try.*

#### PLASENCIA

Handmade in Nicaragua • Medium Bodied

Code	Frontmark	Color	Size	Qty	MSRP	JR Price	Sale Price
PLBE	Belicoso ✓	N	6.25 x 54	25	\$112.50	\$72.95	\$62.95
PLCO	Corona	N	5.75 x 44	25	\$100.00	\$64.95	\$54.95
PLL	Lonsdale	N	6.75 x 44	25	\$106.25	\$68.95	\$58.95
PLLF	Longfellow*	N	7.12 x 42	15	\$75.00	\$49.95	\$39.95
PLM	Magnum ✓	N, M	6.00 x 50	25	\$106.25	\$68.95	\$58.95
PLP	Opulencia*	N	6.00 x 50	20	\$105.00	\$66.95	\$56.95
PLPR	Prominente	N	7.50 x 50	25	\$112.50	\$72.95	\$62.95
PLRO	Robusto	N	4.75 x 52	25	\$100.00	\$64.95	\$54.95
PLTKO	TKO	M	4.00 x 43	25	\$75.00	\$47.95	\$37.95

\* Glass Tubed







One of our best sellers, this fantastic, solid, square-pressed Nicaraguan cigar is loaded with creamy coffee flavors and subtle hints of spice. In your choice of either a reddish-brown Nicaraguan EMS wrapper or a dark, oily, and robust Costa Rican maduro, they're incomparable in quality and flavor.

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**\$15<sup>50</sup> Value!**

#### MAYORGA

Handmade in Nicaragua • Medium-Full Bodied

Code	Frontmark	Color • Size	Qty	MSRP	JR Price
MYCH	Churchill	E, M • 7.00 x 50	20	\$95.00	\$62.95
MYC	Corona	E • 5.50 x 42	20	\$75.00	\$49.95
MYCR	Crystal Rounds (Glass Tubed)	E • 6.00 x 50	20	\$95.00	\$62.95
MYG	Gordito Torpedo	E, M • 5.00 x 54	20	\$90.00	\$59.95
MYL	Lonsdale	E • 6.00 x 44	20	\$80.00	\$52.95
MYR	Robusto ✓	E, M • 4.75 x 50	20	\$75.00	\$49.95
MYT	Toro ✓	E, M • 6.00 x 50	20	\$85.00	\$56.95
MYTO	Torpedo	E, M • 6.75 x 52	20	\$95.00	\$62.95

His latest effort is the cultivation of Connecticut shade wrapper in both Nicaragua and Honduras. Most of that type of leaf today comes from the Connecticut Valley in the US or from Ecuador, but there is a big demand for the wrapper, and the Plasencias see opportunity. "Ecuador has a lot of cloud cover, which makes its Connecticut more like shade-grown, but the tobacco still needs sun," adds Nestor, who uses a gauzy type of cheesecloth that provides *some* shade while allowing the tobacco to develop the essential oils needed for the taste. "The crops we are growing in Honduras and Nicaragua have better flavor and are sweeter. Ecuador is great but it has too many clouds and not enough sun. When you have sun, you get more flavor and more aroma, in my opinion."

But which tobacco is his personal favorite? Cuban seed. Nestor explains, "Cuban seed has the great aroma and sweetness. I like the viso because it is medium—not too heavy or light. The Jalapa area in Nicaragua is a great area for shade tobacco wrapper; Estelí is good for filler. In Jamastran, you have the great filler, yet over in San Agustín, you have an area good for wrapper. One area is good for wrapper and one for filler and another for binder."

Today, the Plasencias keep about five years' worth of tobacco, which helps them maintain the consistency of their blends—something that Nestor Andres says is a lot of work. "Every year is different and we have to adjust the blends because of that. The beauty of it is that there is not a formula in this business so you never get bored. Something is always happening and you have to make decisions in the field depending on if it is going to rain or it will have sun. Then when you cut the tobacco leaves and you have to turn the green leaves to brown, you must control the humidity, temperature, and air movement. You can spoil the whole crop in one day with a bad decision in the curing process." Those are the details Nestor always stresses.

As for one day going back to Cuba, Nestor says he would like to grow tobacco there again like his father, but quickly adds that it would take him and Nestor Andres a long time to bring Cuban soil—which has been farmed out over the decades—back to its former state. •

